# What education is

You asked: Education
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**Education** is the process of gaining knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes through learning. It includes instruction in schools and universities, but it also includes learning through community activities and self-directed study. In other words, education is broader than going to school. [1]

Education is also a lifelong process. It can begin in early childhood and continue through higher education, work, family life, and adulthood. UNESCO describes it as a human right and says that quality education extends from preschool to higher education and beyond. [2]

How education transforms lives
This UNESCO video presents education's role in people's lives and communities.
Video · https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d16rT9PJLVs

## What education can include

The best-known form is **formal education**: organized teaching in recognized institutions such as schools, colleges, and universities. It usually follows a curriculum and may lead to grades, certificates, or degrees.




This classroom scene shows how formal education can bring students with different needs together. · Image source: Importance of Diversity in Education | Inclusive Teaching Strategies | Exeed College

Other learning matters too:

- **Non-formal education** is organized, planned learning outside the usual formal system. It may complement school or offer an alternative route, such as a community course or workplace training. [3]
- **Informal learning** happens through everyday life. Examples include learning from family, volunteering, reading independently, practising a hobby, or working with others. UNESCO includes community engagement and self-directed study within education. [1]

People may move between these forms throughout their lives. A student can learn mathematics in school, gain practical skills in a technical program, and develop communication skills through a job or community activity.

## Why education matters

Education can help people understand the world, take part in society, and develop abilities for further study or work. It can also pass on languages, knowledge, and shared values. However, these benefits are not automatic. They depend on whether learning is safe, relevant, inclusive, and well taught.

This is why education is a public-policy issue, not only a personal one. Governments and communities make choices about funding, teachers, school access, curriculum, disability inclusion, language, and technology. Rules also differ by place. The required years of schooling, qualifications offered, costs, and ways progress is measured are set by local or national systems.

## Access and quality are still unequal

Education has expanded greatly, but access and learning remain uneven. UNESCO's 2026 monitoring report estimates that 273 million children and young people were out of school in 2024. It reports that this number had increased for seven consecutive years. [4]

Being enrolled does not always mean that students are learning enough. UNESCO's 2026 data update estimates that, by the age when primary school should be complete, about half of students reach minimum reading proficiency and about 40% reach it in mathematics. [5]

Differences in wealth, location, gender, disability, conflict, and access to qualified teachers or technology can affect a learner's opportunities. For example, the 2026 report identifies wealth as a major source of unequal access at several education levels. [6]

## Making the topic manageable

"Education" can mean several different questions. It may mean choosing a pathway, such as university or technical training. It may mean understanding a local school system, improving teaching or study habits, or comparing education data. The useful answer depends on which of these meanings is intended.

Sources


1. UNESCO https://www.unesco.org/en/query-list/e/education
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